

International Media Coverage of the Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon: Case of Aljazeera and BBC

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ABSTRACT

The mass media greatly contributes in the starting, continuation, and termination of many crises. This paper critically assesses the involvement of Aljazeera and BBC in the coverage of the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon between 2016 and 2017. Considering the extensive literature which suggests that International media coverage of African crises are often reported with bias, this paper analyzes objectively how Aljazeera and the BBC reported on the Anglophone crises. Using content analysis, the time period of analysis was four months, from December 2016 through March 2017. The study's population consisted of a sample of news reports of Aljazeera Television and BBC radio during this period. Our study revealed that the international media coverage of the Cameroon Anglophone crises by Aljazeera and the BBC was objective although it appears more airtime was given to those with opposing voices.

Keywords: *Cameroon Anglophone Crisis, Media Coverage, Aljazeera, BBC*

1.1 Background

What has now developed as the Anglophone crises in Cameroon started when common law lawyers began a strike against the appointment of judges in predominantly English courts who do not have any mastery or satisfactory mastery of the English Language. On the 21st of

November 2016, Anglophone educators joined the strike opposing the employment of teachers who only speak French to teach in schools, especially technical schools. Some local residents mainly in the South West and North West regions later joined in the protest. Some of them complain that they are excluded from

top civil service jobs and that government documents are often only published in French, even though English is also an official language according to the constitution of Cameroon.

The continued dangers which crises such as these pose for humanity dictate that all institutions or organisations that have anything to do with them, should handle with absolute care. The mass media constitute one of such institutions. It has been amply established that the mass media play a major role in the starting, continuation and termination of any crises. Reasons why there is need to continually assess the performance of the mass media in reporting crises. Political crisis in Africa may appear to be incomplete without reference to media as part promoters of the mayhem. The role of radio in the escalation of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda is a frequently cited case to support the fact that the mass media can be responsible in escalating a conflict.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The international media, the BBC and Aljazeera especially, reported extensively and continue to report on the Cameroon Anglophone crisis especially at the height of the crisis in 2017. However, government officials and many Cameroonians have mixed feelings about the angles these international media organ took in reporting about the crisis. Some felt these international news organs are sympathetic about the claimed Anglophone cause while others think their coverage is objective.

Studies have shown that Western media coverage of foreign countries, particularly of African nations, is severely insufficient, is often stereotyped or oversimplified, and primarily focuses on crisis events (Hultman, 1992; Fair, 1993; Osunde, 1996). This paper analyzes the degree of coverage the Anglophone crises is received, as well as the type and focus of the coverage.

1.3 Research Questions

RQ1: What is the content of Aljazeera and BBC coverage of Anglophone crises in Cameroon?

RQ2: What is the dominant perspective or type of portrayal of Aljazeera and BBC coverage of the Anglophone crises?

1.4 Research Objectives

To identify the dominant news contents of Aljazeera and the BBC on the Cameroon Anglophone Crisis.

To determine the portrayal of the Cameroon Anglophone Crisis by Aljazeera and the BBC.

2.1 Literature Review

When Africa does receive Western news coverage, articles commonly have a narrow focus, due in some part to ignorance by journalists, media frames, and stereotyping. Africa is often depicted as immersed in ethnic violence and political and military fighting (Fair, 1993). African coverage also has a different vocabulary. Violence in Africa is termed “black-on-black”, but violence in Bosnia or in Northern Ireland is never called

“white-on-white” (Hawk, 1992). African coverage is usually a different paradigm than coverage of other regions.

Some scholars have noted that the media has often sensationalized crises in Africa (Maloba, 1992). For example, coverage by Western media of the Angolan Civil War from 1975 to 2002 according to Ibelema (1992), suffered from media frames. Because the Reagan administration supported Jonas Savimbi, leader of the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) as an anti-communist freedom fighter, the U.S. news media relied heavily on rebel Savimbi’s version of events despite counter claims from the complete local diplomatic community.

Another study which focused on the U.S. media coverage of South African elections in 1994 found that the media, specifically the Washington Post and the New York Times, by framing issues according to the values of American democracy, presented issues in a way

that encouraged negotiation, reconciliation, free elections, and all-inclusive government. U.S. media coverage also discouraged violence and put forth a favourable image of South Africa (Reta, 2000). The media also portrayed pro-election groups and individuals positively, and portrayed all groups that were against free elections and unified national government negatively. Coverage was also ethnocentric (Reta, 2000).

A study of U.S. television coverage of Rwandan refugees in Zaire/Congo and Rwanda found that the coverage stripped the refugees of their cultural and historical identities by depicting them as either constantly moving or incarcerated. Thus the media framed these events as a humanitarian story with emphasis on African need and Western kindness (Fair & Parks, 2001).

U.S. media coverage of famine victims in Africa most often depicts images of women and children without men. By emphasizing these

women and children's helplessness, this coverage reinforces Western ideas that Africa is chaotic and hopeless. This kind of coverage, which often does not take into consideration historical and local contexts of events, supports the concepts of Western superiority, and ultimately supports racial and cultural stereotypes (Fair, 1996).

Western media reports on disease such as maternal and neonatal mortality is usually treated differently. The ebola outbreak in certain parts of sub Saharan Africa was reported differently compared to how pandemics in the West are reported. For example, AIDS news in Africa is primarily related to political events and international conferences. In 2000, sixty percent of the articles on AIDS and HIV on the evening news programs of CBS, ABC and NBC were aired during the World AIDS Conference in Durban, South Africa. Outside of these international political events, there is little coverage (Lehrman, 2004).

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in this study is content analysis, which is a systematic method by which to analyze message content. It is an excellent way to describe mass communication content objectively, systematically, and quantitatively, and so has become one of the frequently-used methodologies for mass communication research (Kaid & Wadsworth, 1989; Stempel, 2003).

3.1 Sampling

Aljazeera and BBC were chosen for analysis because of their wide broadcast and popularity in Cameroon, international viewership, their reputation, and because they contribute to setting the agenda for most Western and African media. The time period of analysis is four months, from December 2016 through March 2017. The study's population consisted of all reports of Aljazeera and BBC during this period.

3.2 Definitions of Major Terms

Media coverage: media reporting of events.

Image: public perception in terms of positive, negative and neutral.

Depth of coverage: amount of detail in or length of the story.

Crisis news: news focusing on a negative event.

Human interest news: news focusing on interests and values.

International media: BBC, Aljazeera.

3.3 Coding Scheme

This study duplicated Osunde's (1996) coding scheme. Coders identified the primary topic of each news story. In the event of multiple topics in an article, coders identified the topic that receives the bulk of the coverage. This study was coded according to the following topics:

Protest/Strike, Political dialogue, Human Rights violation, Crime, Terrorism

This study used the following categories of analysis:

1. Type of News

Crisis news 1, Development news 2, Human interest news 3

2. Within Crisis News

Clashes between protesters and police 1, Acts of vandalism and terror 2, Civil disobedience 3

3. Within Development News

Dialogue between parties 1, Retaliation by government 2, Escalation or reduction of strike activities 3

4. Within Human Interest News

Attacks on Institution 1, Torture of detainees 2, Focus on personalities 3

Intercoder Reliability

Two coders took part in this study. The primary coder coded 100% of the articles. The secondary coder coded ten percent of the articles in order to establish intercoder reliability. All coding sheets were compared in order to address discrepancies.

Data Analysis

Data from the coding sheets were imported into SPSS and analyzed. Descriptive statistics including percentages are used to evaluate the findings of this study.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DATA ANALYSIS

The purpose of this study was to explore levels and types of coverage of the Cameroon Anglophone Crises by the international media mainly Aljazeera and BBC with particular attention to the degree and percentage of crisis news. A content analysis of stories aired within a period of ten weeks on the BBC and Aljazeera from December 2016 to March 2017 revealed Aljazeera carried out at least twelve reports on the Cameroon Anglophone Crises while the BBC carried out at least ten reports. This gave a percentage of 55% for Aljazeera and 45% for the BBC.

4.1 Types of News

The most common type of news reports was crisis news (19/86%). There were (2/9%) of mainly human interest stories and (1/5%) of them were developing stories. Within crisis news, the majority of the reports (14 reports; 73%) had to do with deadly violence including when government forces allegedly shot four

people involved in the strikes in Bamenda, Aljazeera also cited how a Reuters news reporter saw police open fire on a crowd, the arrest of at least 100 people who were arrested following days of protests. All the above mainly had to deal with clashes between police and protesters. Acts of vandalism and terror constituted (4/21%) of the reports on crises news. An Aljazeera report stated that some demonstrators were armed with steel bars and stones according to one police officer adding that the officers acted in self-defense. Reports focusing on civil disobedience constituted the least in just one of the reports (1/6%). Mainly was a report on the ghost towns that had many civil servants not report for work for several days.

Within development news, there were (5/ 23%) which focused on the increasing violence mainly the escalation of protests and further arrests and the eminent shut down of the internet in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon (Northwest and Southwest

Regions). In a report on Aljazeera on the 25th of January 2017, it was already being reported that it had been eight days since authorities ordered the country's telecommunications providers to shut off internet connections for both regions. This was a major retaliation by the government against communities in which the protests were taking place mainly in the Anglophone regions.

Within human interest news, (3/14%) of the reports stressed the need for the respect of human rights on the part of the government in clamping down at the protesters. In an Aljazeera report of December 9, 2016 it was reported that human rights groups called on Cameroon to investigate and prosecute police officers accused of using "excessive force" during an anti-government protest where at least four people were killed. The BBC and Aljazeera both reported on the cutting of the internet as a human rights violation. The expounded on their reports when they began reporting about digital refugees in the Anglophone part of Cameroon who crossed to

the French speaking regions regularly in search of data. There were no direct reports on torture of detainees or particular focus on a personality.

4.2 Focus of Story

These foci were important to study in order to better understand how the coverage of the Cameroon Anglophone crises unfolded during this period. In all the stories aired that were analyzed, there was at least an attribution to a source in all the stories (22/100%). Whether these sources were credible or not credible is another subject matter but at least sources were cited. In three of the reports (3/14%) attributions were made to government sources including a statement on the shutting down of the internet but a government source never commented directly. However during a special edition of “The Stream” on Aljazeera, Communications Minister Issa Tchiroma Bakary shared his views during the 26 minutes programme.

4.3 Length of Story

Examining the length of stories by words adds another dimension to describing the levels of coverage the Cameroon Anglophone crises received from BBC and Aljazeera. The reports had an average of length was 299 to 350 words. Their durations were mainly between 60 to 150 seconds.

5.1 Discussion and Conclusion

This study used content analysis to explore how the BBC and Aljazeera covered the Cameroon Anglophone crises. This study appears to show profound changes in international media coverage of Africa since previous studies. El Zein and Cooper (1992) conducted a content analysis of the New York Times’ coverage of Africa from 1976 to 1990. The researchers found 53.8% crisis in 1976, 73.2% in 1981, and 87.7%. This study found a much higher percentage (86%). At first glance, it may appear as if BBC and Aljazeera focused more on negative coverage. This can be explained as improved coverage by these international media

because our analysis was focused only on reports during the Cameroon Anglophone crises.

From our study, it is clear that the BBC and Aljazeera gave more airspace to strikers and protesters than to government officials to state their points of view. In some of the stories, the reporters stated that they could not independently verify their information from government sources reasons why a huge majority of the reports granted interviews to those in support of the protest. From the data we gathered, it appears that the international media focused more on the side of the protesters. They were given much airtime in the reports and the views of the protesters were reiterated severally. One may conclude that much emphasis was laid what could be termed “marginalization” of the Anglophones than the efforts that the government was making.

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